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ABSTRACT

The characteristics of 69 award-winning television commercials from 1948 through 1958 were compared to those of 58 award-winning commercials from 1976 and 1977. The examined characteristics were type of storyline used, selling strategies, use of humor, live action versus animation, production techniques, and the depiction of blacks, women, orientals, and "rugged" men. Apparently television commercial formats have remained relatively consistent over the years, with the only noticeable change being an increase in dramatic structure. Significantly fewer animated commercials were used in the more recent period. Blacks and orientals, two groups that did not appear in any of the older commercials, were found in small percentages of the more recent ones (the orientals were depicted in stereotypical situations.) Women appeared in increasing numbers in the later commercials and were depicted as more independent than those in the earlier commercials: but they continued to be portrayed as sex symbols in some of the later commercials. The rugged, individualistic outdoorsmen so often found in older commercials were rarely found in the more recent commercials (one modern commercial was a tongue-in-cheek spoof of this "rugged" characterization). The standard length of 1948-58 commercials was 60 seconds, while the length of commercials in the more recent group was equally split between 30 and 60 seconds. The 1976 and 1977 commercials showed increases in the number of scenes per commercial. (RL)

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AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EARLY TELEVISION COMMERCIALS COMPARED WITH SELECTED RECENT TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EARLY TELEVISION COMMERCIALS COMPARED WITH SELECTED RECENT TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

The introduction of network television in 1948 marked the beginning of what has been called the most powerful and successful advertising medium ever created.[1] At last, manufacturers had the ultimate method to reach consumers in the homes, a unique combination of sight, sound and motion. Soon, hundreds of television commercials, requiring substantial capital investment, began to permeate the airwaves.[2]

In 1959, after 10 years of network television advertising, a mass media executive named Wallace A. Ross, established an awards program, which he named the American Television Commercials Festival and Forum, to honor the "best" television commercials of the decade. It was his intention to have an independent panel of judges sift through all the commercials recorded since 1948 and choose the "classics" of the period. Two-thirds of the initial panel of judges, 31 men and three women, were employed in creative or management capacities by 24 of the country's largest advertising agencies and were, at that time, directly involved in their agency's creative production of television commercials. The remaining members included representatives of 13 of America's leading national advertisers, the firms for whom the bulk of U.S. commercials are prepared.

Ross aimed for objectivity. He instituted a rotating attendance of 10 to 15 judges at each screening and no judge voted on a commercial with which he or his agency or company had any affiliation. A substantial passage of time further enhanced the judging since no commercial could be

nominated that had not been first broadcast some time prior to five years preceeding the Festival. The Festival's suggested criteria for judging these and all commercials in subsequent years were: believability, tastefully, copy line, demonstration, identification and memorability.

This original program was received with such enthusiasm that a yearly awards presentation was established in 1960 and the Festival has since become known as the Clio Awards.[3] This paper will focus on characteristics of these 69 original award-winning commercials from 1948-1958, contrasting them with the 58 American commercials of two recent Clio award years, 1976 and 1977. This initial effort to contrast early and recent commercials can only be considered exploratory. It can not be said that these two groups of commercials represent all the commercials or their respective eras. Nor can any statement be made that the early commercials influenced the later ones. Any such analysis would have to use a statistically representative sample of commercials for all the years from 1948 to the present. These two groups, however, do represent the Clio award-winning commercials from their respective eras and can thus be viewed as the "best" commercials within the Clio judging criteria. These early and recent groups of commercials were compared across a broad range of characteristics: type of storyline used; selling strategies; use of humor; live action versus animation; depiction of Blacks, Women, Orientals and "rugged" men; and some production techniques. Every commercial was viewed many times in an attempt to segment and study its various individual characteristics.

Since the beginning, television commercials have used six basic formats or storylines for structuring the selling message.[4]

Advertisers learned early that it is easier to recall ideas than fit into a cohesive form than ideas that are unrelated or jumbled,[5] and these formats provide the basic guide for the copywriter and producer of the commercial.

The first format is the problem-solution or slice-of-life. This commercial begins with a person at the point of, and just before the discovery of, an answer to a problem. Most center on some personal, household or business dilemma. The product is introduced, extolled and tried. At the end, we are told that the new user is now a better, happier person for having used it.[6] An early example of this format is a commercial produced for Kleenex Napkins in 1957. The scene is a mother and daughter having lunch. The napkin keeps slipping off the daughter's lap much to the mother's dismay. Manners, a midget butler, enters and saves the day with new Kleenex Napkins that "won't slide off your lap. They cling like cloth."[7]

The second type is the straight-sell or spokesperson commercial. This format consists primarily of someone, usually an announcer delivering a sales talk directly to the camera, ordinarily pointing or holding up the product while he talks and perhaps demonstrating or trying the product.[8] The third, a variation of the spokesperson format, is the celebrity endorsement or testimonial. These are commercials in which screen stars, sports personalities, and prominent figures from all walks of life are used as sales people. The form is straight-sell, but with the added impact of the famous person.[9] Early examples of straight-sell and celebrity endorsement commercials are announcer Rex Marshall promoting the benefits of Instant Maxwell House Coffee[10] (1956) and Dodger baseball player Pee Wee Reese

urging viewers to buy Gillette Blue Blades[11] (1955).

The fourth format, the dramatic structure, is a commercial that tells a story; a clear, step-by-step unfolding of a message that has a definite beginning, middle and end.[12] It is similar to a miniature movie episode except that the narration is done off screen.[13] This format establishes tension, keeps the climax unresolved until the ending and tries to promote a feeling of satisfaction or reward.[14] A recent example of this structure is Exxon's public relations commercial from 1976 about Anne Sullivan. Set in a Bicentennial theme, Exxon's campaign saluted great Americans like Anne Sullivan for her pioneering work with handicapped Helen Keller. The commercial beginns with Anne coming to the Keller home, shows the difficulties Anne had in teaching deaf and dumb Helen Keller and climaxing with the dramatic breakthrough at the water well when Helen spells "water" in sign language.[15]

The fifth, the song-and-dance production, is a type of commercial that only the large advertiser can afford. Often with extensive choreography and original music, this is definitely an art form that skillfully combines entertainment values with emotional selling.[16] A recent example is the Sugar Free Dr. Pepper commercial from 1977. The singing and dancing are all done inside an elaborate set designed like a pin ball machine.[17]

Commercials are, of course, produced combining two or more of these formats, but usually some element dominates making the commercial more of one kind than another. When a product demonstration dominates the action, this becomes a major commercial format as well. Demonstrations can be simple,

using a voice-over announcer(not on screen) and a lot of close-up camera work, or they can be exotically staged in unusual locales with large numbers of talent.[18] Two examples of this format include a Remington Electric Shaver shaving the fuzz of a peach (for tender skin) and the bristles off a hairbrush (for heavy beards) (1954); and St. Regis Paper Company showing a Rolls Royce automobile being driven over a brige made with corrigated paper to demonstrate its strength (1977).[19]

The foregoing descriptions of the six formats were used definitionally to categorize the commercials from the early and recent periods. Table 1 shows the results of the classification.

Table 1

Format Used	Early	Recent
1. Problem-Solution (Slice of Life)	1 (22%)	10 (17%)
2. Celebrity Endorsement (Testimonial)	4 (6%)	4 (7%)
3. Straight-Sell (Spokesperson)	13 (19%)	7 (12%)
4. Dramatic	13 (19%)	21 (36%)
5. Song-and-Dance Production	10 (14%)	7 (12%)
6. Demonstration	14 (20%)	9 (16%)
TOTALS	69 (100%)	58 (100%)

Chi Square = 12.59; for 5 df, p = .03

It appears that television commercial formats have remained relatively consistent over the years, at least for these two groups of award-winning commercials, and the one noticable increase is the dramatic structure. One reason for this jumb may be the fact that the 1976-1977 commercials had more Bicentennial themes than would normally be usual. This would lend itself to the dramatic format much more so than any other. Exxon had two other

Bicentennial commercials that won awards for 1976 besides "Anne Sullivan." They all have distinct dramatic formats. Another reason perhaps for the increase in dramatic commercials is the trend toward public relations or image/reputation-type commercials. This selling strategy is on the increase. From 1971 to 1978, television showed a 48 percent expenditure increase in this commercial strategy.[20] The public relations commercial also lends itself to the dramatic format, because corporate stories are being related to the public.

An advertiser, usually by commissioning an advertising agency, creates television commercials to serve one of four major selling strategies:[21]

1. To introduce a new product; an improved product; or an old product in a new form. Example: A 1977 spot showed Fiat meeting the needs of the car buying public over the years.[22]

2. To switch viewers' market preference from a competing brand. Example: A 1976 spot showed how much better Schmidts Beer tasted to a participant in a Coors Beer taste test than the Coors.[23]

3. To help create or maintain brand or corporate reputation. (public relations type 1). Example: In 1976 and 1977 Eastman Kodak continued its "Times of Your Life" campaign, demonstrating the benefits of picture taking and the quality of Kodak film in preserving happy moments with your family.[24]

4. To do the same as 3., by implication, with some form of "public service" message. (public relations type 2). Example: The Exxon Bicentennial campaign with 60 second stories about "Anne Sullivan," "Mark Twain," and "Dizzy Dean."[25]

The four sales strategies were also used to categorize both the early and recent Clio award-winning commercials. The results are in Table 2.

Table 2

Selling Strategies	Early	Recent
1. New or Improved Product	21 (30%)	10 (17%)
2. Swith Brand Preference	44 (65%)	26 (45%)
3. Brand/Corporate Reputation	4 (6%)	13 (22%)
4. Public Service Message	0 (0%)	9 (16%)
TOTALS	69 (100%)	58 (100%)

Chi Square = 21.5; for 3 df, p = .01

The major product selling strategies, 1 and 2 above, will, of course, dominate television commercials. What is of interest, though, is the emergence of the public relations commercial, of which there are two main types-image (3) and public service (4); and it has been predicted that these types of commercials will continue to gain more acceptance as long as corporations and other organizations feel the need to promote themselves, as well as promote their products.[26]

There are two types of commercials that may fall into any of the formats or selling strategies: The humorous commercial and the live action or animated commercial. The humorous commercial evolved out of the variety radio programs for which the show's host gave his own treatment of the commercial message and commercials faired best with audiences if the performer himself was a comedian. A typical use of the humorous approach, as integrated into a variety program of the early television period is a commercial from The Gary Moore Show in 1955. This 2 minute 28 second spot has announcer Durward Kirby, singer Denise Lor and Moore doing a Wagnarian "Soap Opera" with a pre-recorded singing tract. The effect has Denise Lor singing in a deep bass voice and Kirby and Moore using high-pitched operatic voices, all extolling the virtues

of S.O.S. Scouring Pads.[27] A 1976 humorous commercial cast in a similar selling style has commedianne Joan Rivers selling Goodrich Radial Tires. Rivers tells the audience that she knows nothing about tires and she, like most women, knows the most about housework,..."like washing the dishes, making the beds, which is feudal, because in six months you only have to start all over again."...But, she thinks Goodrich makes excellent tires because she knows a Goodrich dealer. "He married my cousin, 37, and we thought...never!"[28]

The debate between the use of live action and the animated commercial has continued since the beginning. In a 1957 television advertising textbook, the author states:

> In television commercials, the animated cartoon has often the highest viewer interest, the longest life and the lowest cost-per showing. Yet it remains the most misused and abused technique in the business. Cartoon is no cure-all. It has limitations. It wins the quickest interest, but it lacks depth of penetration. In the movie theatre, the audience likes and laughs at the cartoon, but it is emotionally moved by the live action dramatic feature.[29]

If the early and recent Clios are any indication, however, the debate seems to be over. Only one animated commercial appeared in 1976 and two in 1977, while over half of the early TV commercials looked at for this study are cartoon-type. One major reason perhaps is the cost. Black and white animation is relatively cheap and all of the 69 original Clios are black and white. There was little color until 1964 when 15 percent of the Clios were non-black and whites. In 1967, 78 percent were in color, increasing in 1968 to 90 percent. Table 3 summarizes the use of humor and live action versus animation in commercials for both periods.

Table 3

Use of Humor	Early	Recent
	12(17%)	17(29%)
Live Action versus Animation		
Live Action	34(49%)	55(95%)
Animation	35(51%)	3(5%)
Totals	69(100%)	58(100%)

Chi Square = 31.18; for 1 df, p = .01

The 1960s and 70s brought waves of protest from minority Americans who felt neglected and discriminated against, across all phases of American life. The two most prominant protestors were, and still are, Blacks and Women. An integral part of this analysis of early television Clios therefore was to look at how Blacks, Women and also Orientals were depicted, and to compare those portrayed with recent commercials. Certainly, it can not be said here that these early depictions represent how those groups were shown across all television commercials or if television commercials in general from any era reflect the prevailing attitudes about those groups. It is nonetheless interesting to note in this exploratory setting how Blacks, Women and Orientals appeared in selected early and recent television commercials.

It is easy to sum up the Black actor in the early Clios: there are none. The only exception is from a 1955, 2-minute Dodge automobile extravaganza. In the Detroit Dodge plant, one Black, named Joe, is shown at his station, face partially obscured for about 1.5 seconds.[30] This is the only occasion that a Black appears in any of the 69 commercials from 1948-1958. On the other hand,

in 1976-1977, Black actors appear in four of the 58 commercials. In two of the four, Blacks dominates the action, but in both cases they are Black children and not adults. In the other two commercials Black families are depicted along with scenes of White families using household products like Downey Fabric Softener. The Downey spot also shows an Oriental family.[31] The only other Orientals to appear in any of the commercials are two in 1976, in both cases, the settings are Chinese restaurants with Chinese waiters.[32]

Women dominate the acting in eight commercials from the early era. Yet, in all but one case, the women are in the home and are seen using household products, like Kleenex, Clairol and Tide. The Betty Furness-Westinghouse Studio One commercial from 1954 (2 1/2 minutes) is a good example of the typical live studio demonstration that was popular before video taping was available in 1956. It is also a good example of how women were generally depicted in these commercials, always at home cleaning, in this case defrosting a refrigerator, or cooking. As Furness demonstrates how easy it is to open a Westinghouse refrigerator, the door refuses to open and is eventually released by the stage manager.[33]

In the recent Clios, women were out of the home but, in at least one case, still in distress. The commercial is a 1977 60 second spot for Pace CB radios and the actress is stalled with a boiling radiator in her Jaguar XKE. She gets on her CB and calls for help. From everywhere, hundreds of cars, trucks, vans and mobile homes come to her rescue, thus showing the virtues of having a Pace CB.[34] In other commercials, however, Women dominate the action by selling a wide variety of products, from tires to film. It appears in these later commercials that women are much more independent than as earlier shown.

Women continue to be portrayed as sex symbols, evidenced by two commercials in the early group and three in the recent collection. The major example in the

early group is the Muriel Cigar Spot. This animated 60 second song-and-dance format from 1951 shows a sexy Mae West-type cigar characterization, which repeatedly coos to the audience, "Why don't you pick me up and smoke me sometime?"[35] From the later group, the commercial "Short, Shorts," aired in 1976, shows six scantily-clad models singing and dancing to "We Wear Short, Shorts" and extolling the benefits of Nair Hair Remover for the legs.[36]

It is worth noting also the prevalent male role in the early commercials. He was rugged, individualistic, an outdoorsman. There are five of these examples from the early years, the outstanding one is a 1955 60 second spot for Marlboro Cigarettes:

> Announcer (V.O.): This is a man who smokes Marlboro Cigarettes. What kind of man is he?
>
> Man (V.O.): I'm a guy who likes to work on my car. I like to take it apart, and put it back together. I get to working on it, and I forget where I am, what time it is. I even forget to eat.
>
> Announcer: You don't forget to smoke, though.
>
> Man: I always smoke when I work. They go together.
>
> Announcer: Why Marlboro?
>
> Man: Well, it's a combination of things. When I draw on a cigarette, I want to taste something. With Marlboro, I do. And it's got a filter that works. Then there's this flip-top box. I like things that are well-designed. This box is interesting and practical.
>
> Announcer: Would you recommend Marlboro to your friends?
>
> Man: I already have.
>
> Announcer: New Marlboro. Filter. Flavor. Flip-top box. Popular filter price.37

This rugged individualist image, however, only appeared in one commercial from the recent group, and this was a tongue-in-cheek spoof of a truck driver for Old Home Bread.[38]

Table 4 summarizes the use of Blacks, Women, Orientals and "rugged" men for the two groups of commercials.

Table 4

Use of Blacks, Women, Orientals and "Rugged" Men	Early	Recent
Blacks		
Appearances	1(1.5%)	4(7%)
Dominant Role	0(0%)	2(3%)
Women		
Dominant Role	8(12%)	13(22%)
Orientals		
Appearances	0(0%)	3(5%)
Dominant Role	0(0%)	1(1.5%)
Men in "Rugged" Roles	5(7%)	1(1.5%)

Chi Square=9.69: for 5 df, p=.09

A few technical considerations are worth mentioning from both the early and recent groups of Clio commercials. The standard for 1948-1958 was the 60 second spot, while the length for the recent group is equally split between 30s and 60s. The recent commercials utilized standard lengths from 30 seconds to 2 minutes, while the old commercials varied in length from 8 seconds to 6 minutes and 45 seconds. Seventeen percent of these commercials had non-standard lengths, such as the two extremes for the early group just mentioned. This group had four commercials that were live studio productions (kinescope recorded) and all the rest were filmed, yet all of the recent commercials were filmed, as might be expected.

An additional production aspect is the scene transition, or the art of getting from one scene to another cinematically. For this study, a sample of six 60 second spots from each group were analyzed for length of scenes, cuts and dissolves. A cut is the instantaneous replacement of a frame with one that is completely new (a new scene).[39] A dissolve is a fading in of a new scene over the fade-out of the previous one.[40] The early commercials averaged 10 separate scenes per 60 second commercial, which is almost 6 seconds per scene and the recent commercials averaged 16 scenes at 3.7 seconds each. It appears that numbers of scenes are increasing and, of course, length of scenes are decreasing.

There was an average of three dissolves and six cuts for the older commercials and 3.4 dissolves and 11.6 cuts for the more recent commercials.

Table 5 summarizes these technical characteristics.

Table 5

Technical Characteristics	Early	Recent
Length of commercials		
20s	3(4%)	0(0%)
30s	2(3%)	26(45%)
60s	48(70%)	27(46%)
90s	0(0%)	1(2%)
120s	4(6%)	4(7%)
Non-standard Lengths (8, 53.5, 55, 1:20, 1:27, 2:28, 2:30, 3:07, 3:50, 4:08, 6:45)	12(16%)	0(0%)
	69(100%)	58(100%)
	Chi square=41.8, for 5 df, p=.01	
Film/Live Studio		
Film	65(94%)	58(100%)
Live Studio (kinescoped)	4(6%)	0(0%)
	69(100%)	58(100%)
	Chi square=3.47; for 1 df, p=.06	
Scene Length and Transitions		
Average Number of Scenes	10	16
Average Length of Scenes	5.9 sec.	3.7 sec.
Average Number of Cuts	6	11.6
Average Number of Dissolves	3	3.4

The purpose of this study was to begin analyzing the thirty year history of American network television advertising, by focusing on the changing characteristics of some selected commercials of the early television period, 1948-1958, and their counterparts for the 1976-1977 period. No generalizations can be made to all commercials for the thirty years because it is unknown if these Clio award-winning commercials truly represent the thousands of commercials broadcast during those years. Indeed, a much more comprehensive and detailed analysis must be made before any such generalization could be determined. This study should, however, be helpful in pioneering future efforts in examining the characteristics and influences of television commercials, and may also be

helpful, not only to those interested in broadcast advertising history, which is almost completely unexplored, but also perhaps to advertising practitioners, such as copywriters and commercial producers, who could make use of such a perspective in practical applications of their profession.

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